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## Cardi B: Love & Hip Hop's unlikely feminist hero

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In just a short time, Belcalis Almanzar has emerged as a feminist hero who is vocal about women's rights and supporting women's choices. But she is not often celebrated. She is often overlooked, dismissed and disregarded. She is an Afro Latina who is a former stripper, Instagram model turned reality television star who transformed into one of the most talked about rappers. Almanzar, known by her stage name Cardi B, has become one of the most popular reality stars in recent years.

In a time when one of the most controversial f words, feminism, turns people off Cardi B adopts that label and ideology with pride. She often talks about feminism and takes a feminist position on the show that made her a star, *Love & Hip Hop*, and on her social media channels. But she has found herself as the target of classist and perhaps even racist critiques because her brand of feminism has not met the standards of those in more formal feminist spaces. In November 2016 she defended and explained the feminism that she embodies in a video statement to her millions of Instagram followers:

If you believe in equal rights for women, that makes you a feminist. I don't understand how you bitches feel like being a feminist is a woman that have a education, that have a degree. That is not being a feminist. You discouraging a certain type of woman, that certainly doesn't make you one. Some bitches wanna act like "oh you have to read a book about feminists." That's only a definition for a simple word. The problem is that being a feminist is something so great and y'all don't want me to be great but too bad. Because at the end of the day I'm going to encourage any type of woman. You don't have to be a woman like me to encourage and support you and tell you "yes bitch, keep on going." And that's why you mad you little dusty ass bitch.

Cardi B is not perfect and neither is feminism. But it is through her position in pop culture as a reality television star on Vh1's heavily watched franchise that she introduced feminism and feminist practices to people who have been closed off to them. With her 10.1 million Instagram followers, 3.1 million Facebook followers and 1 million Twitter followers, Cardi B has access to a massive audience that is influenced by her. But it is my hope that Cardi B will influence feminists inside the academy to not be so rigid in their definition(s) of feminism.

In her contemporary feminist classic *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* Joan Morgan wrote, "I needed a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays. And this was not my foremothers' feminism" (Joan Morgan 1999, 59). Morgan is advocating for a comprehensive form of feminism that has enough courage to address issues that do not have clear cut and easy solutions, a feminism that is intersectional and fights for the liberation of all. In her Instagram video Cardi B is calling on feminists to have a broader, more inclusive form of feminism that does not just restrict it to women with advanced degrees who have read the canons of feminist scholarship and literature. Like Morgan, nearly 20 years later Cardi B is advocating for feminism that can work through complicated and complex identities and scenarios. Essentially what Cardi B is doing is what hip-hop feminist scholar Gwendolyn Pough (2004) calls "bringing wreck" to classist and even racist notions of what is perceived as legitimate feminism. By bringing wreck, resisting traditional ways and seeing things and reclaiming and recreating spaces (Pough 2004), Cardi B is demanding a space in feminism and carving out room for herself. Hip-hop feminists resist compliance to restrictive and exclusive forms of feminism (Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris 2013). Cardi B does the same. Hip-hop feminists demand that we confront differences and conflicts because not to do so would restrict feminism to a purely scholarly project that stays within the halls of academia and does not move outside to be a sustainable force for social justice and political change (Durham, Cooper, and Morris 2013). Cardi B also resists the notion that feminism is only saved for women formally educated in university halls.

Pop culture and media are where many women artists are expressing their feminism and how they are introducing it to their fans. Beyonce's feminism was criticized, rebuffed, and castigated for not being feminist enough. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the feminist writer whose TED Talk *We Should All Be Feminists* is featured on Beyonce's 2013 *Flawless* song, said she appreciates Beyonce taking a stand on social issues but "her type of feminism is not

mine, as it is the kind that gives quite a lot of space to the necessity of men” (Aimee Kiene 2016). For others Beyonce’s feminism was too capitalist or hypersexual or simply not robust enough. After the release of Beyonce’s 2016 *Lemonade* album, pioneering feminist writer and scholar bell hooks wrote that Beyonce’s was “fantasy feminism” and that “her construction of feminism cannot be trusted. Her vision of feminism does not call for an end to patriarchal domination” (bell hooks 2016). But we have seen Beyonce’s feminism evolve, grow and contribute to the creation of intersectional and transformative art that has done everything from explain black women’s joy and pain to call for resistance to the white supremacy embedded in this nation’s institutions. Beyonce’s generalized girl power anthems *Run the World Girls* and *Flawless* progressed to songs with stronger calls for liberation with the songs *Freedom* and *Formation*.

What if feminists allow Cardi B’s feminism to evolve? Black feminists are already using social media as a tool to fight against the sexual violence that women of color experience (Sherri Williams 2015). Imagine enlisting Cardi B in feminist movements and utilizing her massive social media reach to convey messages about gender equality. What if feminists incorporated Cardi B into their digital activism and exposed her millions of followers to messages of gender justice? Cardi B’s visibility is important in popular culture because she challenges traditional ideas about women, especially women of color. Cardi B was an exotic dancer before she became a social media sensation and reality television star. Most media representations of exotic dancers are shrouded in shame. In fact, the media strongly reinforce the shame of women. Media are one layer in the shame web, a complex set of rigid, gendered and contradictory social expectations that serve to regulate and shame women (Brene Brown 2006). Media help to reinforce those unattainable ideals that leave women feeling cornered and ashamed (Brown 2006). Cardi B is a multimedia entertainer with a prominent presence on reality television, social media and in hip hop. On those multiple platforms Cardi B shreds the same web by being authentic and true to herself, her past, and all of her identities. In media interviews and on *Love & Hip Hop* Cardi B owns and discusses her past employment in strip clubs without shame. In her massively popular summer 2017 hit song *Bodak Yellow* she says: “Look, I don’t dance now/I make money moves/Say I don’t gotta dance/I make money move.” Cardi B’s very presence is an act of resistance to oppressive and restrictive ideologies. She does feminist work through pop culture but it is not validated because her path to feminism is not traditional and, most importantly, she is a sex-positive woman of color from a working class background who challenges some of the traditional views that even feminists possess.

Cardi B came to the nation’s attention less than two years ago when she debuted on *Love & Hip Hop* in December 2015. On the show she challenged patriarchal relationships and ideas about women’s ability to succeed in fields dominated by men, including hip hop. On the show we see several rappers work toward stardom and success but we actually see Cardi B achieve it. Pop culture often challenges traditional gender norms. But this reality television show and its breakout star do not receive the same credit because it is through a format, hip-hop reality television, that some perceive as without value because it is so raw—and perhaps because it is so black. We often see white women entertainers from Madonna to Katy Perry and Taylor Swift lauded for their mainstream versions of girl power and feminism which we know are not perfect but the same has not happened with Cardi B. She recently announced that she will not return to *Love & Hip Hop* because she is too busy pursuing her rising music and acting careers. Will feminists and others take her seriously now that she is

no longer on reality television? That remains to be seen. But we also should not have to wait for people to ascend to what may be perceived to more legitimate social spaces before we pay attention to them and value what they say. If we give so-called low-brow popular culture such as reality television and social media the same consideration that we do more widely accepted genres in pop culture we might find the value in the representations and the feminist work that is happening across all forms of media.

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## Digital media and feminist futures: awkward cooptions in the impasse

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Many have lamented a perceived impasse of feminism in the aftermath of the 2016 US elections (Amanda Hess 2017). The women's March on Washington, a day after Trump's inauguration, was the largest peaceful protest in US history. This march and the sister marches across the USA and around the world were visible displays of the powers of feminism, including its trade value. And in the neoliberal marketplace, feminist aesthetics and feminist slogans sell: they are printed on shorts, hats, and iPhone covers, sold by online small businesses and mainstream clothing stores, and liked or shared as memes. While clearly, pantsuit nations, nasty women apparel, and pink pussy hats did not get Hillary Clinton elected nor halt Donald Trump's presidency, the global circulations of images and objects of protests certainly left their digital footprints. Further, they have come to symbolize a certain moment in time, functioning equally as consumer articles and historical artifacts fit for museums attesting to solidarity, peaceful action, and global energy. But the fact that a majority of white women voted for Trump remains. In the January 2017 issue of the German popfeminist magazine *Missy*, Peggy Piesche (2017) writes:

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